

WHY GOOD CONSUMERS LOVE BAD BRANDS:
ASSERTIVE LANGUAGE MAKES CONSUMERS CARE FOR BRANDS

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This work is dedicated to my family, whose love and support have been my sustenance—my husband, Babur; my son, Keane; my daughter, Lorelei; and my parents, Jim and Susan.

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In social media settings, many firms issue commands to consumers—to post, share or like content—often using forceful and direct (vs. polite) language. However, prior research has shown that commands issued with assertive language elicit negative responses and reactance and also reduce the probability of compliance (Brown and Levinson 1987; Dillard and Shen 2005; Kellerman and Shea 1996; Quick and Considine 2008). In the present research, I show that brands benefit from using assertive language, specifically in the form of increased care and concern from consumers. This is because assertive language communicates an intention to control, and intentionality is one indication of a humanlike mind (Epley and Waytz 2009; Kozak Marsh, and Wenger 2006; Waytz et al. 2010b). Five experiments demonstrate the relationship between assertive language, mind attribution, and care and concern for the brand. Both statistical and experimental evidence of the mediating role of mind attribution are presented. Finally, a boundary effect of this relationship is also explored by examining the role of mind valence, which decouples the link between mind attribution and brand care and concern when a threatening or malevolent mind is attributed to a brand. Thus, this research contributes to the brand anthropomorphism literature by showing that mind attribution, which not only suggests the brand is humanlike but the specific manner in which it is humanlike, can be elicited with subtle linguistic cues and has beneficial effects for the brand. This work is unique in showing a benefit to assertive language. It also offers insights to the mind perception and brand relationship literatures. Finally this work is managerially useful as assertive language can be readily

implemented by firms and fits with a wide variety of brand traits and associations. Additionally the outcome of brand care and concern is beneficial to firms.

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INTRODUCTION

In social media contexts, many brands seek to create engagement with consumers by requesting that they post, share, or like brand content, often using quite direct and forceful (vs. polite) language. However, compelling action is fraught with difficulties, as the assertive language and interpersonal compliance literatures have thoroughly documented (Brown and Levinson 1987; Dillard and Shen 2005; Kellerman and Shea 1996; Quick and Considine 2008). Instructing consumers to act using assertive language reduces the likelihood they will do so (ibid.) and elicits reactance and negative emotions (Fitzsimons and Lehman 2004; Quick and Considine 2008). Figure 1 displays a number of examples of firms employing assertive language. For example, Delta instructs consumers to 1) draw a picture of a plane, 2) take a picture of the drawing, and 3) post it on Facebook using 4) the #Deltadoodles hashtag. Clorox commands consumers to tweet their “bleachable moments” using the hashtag #bleachitaway. What these examples (and many more like them) have in common is their use of assertive (rather than polite) language that offers no reason for acting and no direct benefit to the consumer.

--Insert Figure 1 approximately here --

In this research, I seek to demonstrate that commands issued with assertive language may have beneficial effects for brands, regardless of whether consumers comply. This is because a brand that uses assertive language seems more intentional, and is therefore more likely to be attributed a mind, which is a human-like trait. This increased mind attribution leads to downstream effects in which consumers are more likely to feel concern for or a desire to help the brand. For example, people may be more willing to help the brand by recommending it to others or sharing its social media posts if it is perceived as more humanlike. Although the reciprocity literature (e.g., Bartz and Lydon 2008; Gouldner 1960; Laochumnvanit and Bednall 2005)

suggests that the way to get consumers to be kind to the brand is for the brand to be kind to them, this research proposes and demonstrates that the opposite can also occur.

In five experiments, using various manipulations of assertive language and various different brands and product categories, I demonstrate the relationship between assertive language, mind attribution, and brand care and concern. A pilot study provides initial evidence of the relationship. Two main effect studies provide evidence of mind attribution as the process by which assertive language leads to brand care and concern (measured via both self-report and behavioral outcomes). The process role of mind attribution is also demonstrated by both statistical (Zhao, Lynch and Chen 2010) and experimental methods (Spencer, Zanna and Fong 2005). Finally, I show evidence of a boundary condition of this effect—a brand mind with threatening or harmful qualities is attributed more mind, but it is not granted care and concern when it uses assertive language. Multiple alternative explanations are also ruled out.

This work offers a number of important theoretical contributions to both the mind attribution and marketing anthropomorphization literatures. First, it considers a novel mechanism of brand anthropomorphization—by mind attribution. While the marketing literature has examined the effects of human-like forms or faces for product packaging or logos (for example, Kim and McGill 2011; Puzakova, Rocereto and Kwak 2013), the present work examines a new means of anthropomorphism. Mind attribution is a form of anthropomorphism because only humans have minds with emotion, intention, and cognition (Kozak, Marsh and Wegner 2006). A second contribution of this work is the extension of the mind attribution literature to brands specifically, rather than other types of non-human agents. Importantly, mind attribution occurs along a continuum and often intuitively, so that individuals may not be consciously aware they are attributing a mind to a non-human agent (*ibid.*). This is an important area for further

researcher as consumers may not recognize that they have attributed a mind to the brand, nor that doing so affects their attitudes and behaviors toward the brand.

This work also offers contributions to the assertive language research. First, it documents a positive outcome of such language, which has previously focused on negative outcomes. Finally, this research is the first to demonstrate that assertive language can be an antecedent of anthropomorphism.

The present work is also of managerial interest. It demonstrates a means of anthropomorphizing a brand that may be easier to implement across various types of brand images and associations. Finally, the outcome of mind attribution, brand care and concern, is valuable to firms as it may protect them from damaging activities by consumers, such as negative word of mouth or stealing; it may also lead to an increase in behaviors supportive of the brand, such as recommending it to others.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Below I present the theoretical underpinnings of this work. I draw on the assertive language literature to define the phenomenon under investigation. Next I use the mind attribution literature to explain what leads individuals to perceive that an agent has a mind. I then examine how mind attribution relates to the extant brand anthropomorphism literature in order to demonstrate that the method of anthropomorphism employed in this work is novel, distinct from other types of anthropomorphism, and deserving of further investigation.

Assertive language

The literature on polite and assertive language has extensively examined what kind of linguistic styles are most likely to result in a target complying with a command. This body of work focuses

on the construct of “face,” individuals’ need to publicly present themselves in a positive manner, and argues that assertive language commands are face-threatening acts or intentions (Brown and Levinson 1987). A face-threatening act is one that communicates the issuer does not care about the target’s freedom of action, nor his wants and needs (ibid).

All face threatening acts communicate or imply an intention by the issuer to control the target; however, whether the controlling intent is more or less apparent depends on the type of language used to deliver it. Assertive language, which is direct, forceful, or uses the imperative form, conveys the clearest intent to control and thus poses the greatest threat to face (Brown and Levinson 1987). A number of studies demonstrate that assertive language reduces compliance (Dillard and Shen 2005; Kellerman and Shea 1996; Quick and Considine 2008). For example, research by Quick and Considine (2008) examining the effects of assertive language on exercise behavior found that assertive language (“Weightlifting: You have to do it”) was more likely to elicit reactance, triggered unfavorable evaluations, failed to change attitudes, and did not change behavior in comparison to polite language (“Consider weightlifting”).

Polite language masks the intention to control. Whereas assertive language is maximally efficient (Grice 1975), polite language is less direct and leaves open the possibility of refusing to act (Brown and Levinson 1987; Kellerman and Shea 1996). For this reason, polite language poses less threat to individuals’ face and increases the likelihood of compliance (ibid.). Commands are also more polite if they include reasons for acting (Wilson and Kunkel 2000), which enable the target to comply with the appearance of achieving a benefit rather than being controlled. They also allow the requester to look reasonable rather than controlling (ibid.). Commands that avoid the use of the word “you” are also more polite, as they leave open the

possibility that the command was intended for another person (Brown and Levinson 1987). For example, “you take that out” is more assertive, and thus less polite, than “take that out.”

Within the marketing domain, several studies have examined the effects of assertive language on consumer behavior. Fitzsimons and Lehman (2004) show that unsolicited product recommendations—which were phrased in direct and forceful language—elicited reactance and reduced the appeal of the recommended product. While the present work finds a similar negative effects of assertive language on brand liking and intentions to visit the brand’s store or website, such effects are well known in the literature and I instead focus on an unstudied outcome of assertive language—mind attribution and brand care and concern.

Kronrod et al. (2012b) show that assertive language can be acceptable if the domain is important, for example, a medical emergency. In their work, messages regarding environmental conservation, a subject of high importance, can be acceptably phrased with assertive language. Kronrod and colleagues’ work differs from the present work in that marketing messages from firms are not high in importance. Other work by Kronrod et al. (2012a) has shown that assertive messages are more likely to lead to consumer compliance when used with hedonic goods, because hedonic goods are associated with positive mood and people are more accepting of assertive language when in a positive mood. This work also differs from the present research because I do not study hedonic products or brands. Additionally, consumers can be said to benefit from complying with the commands issued in Kronrod et al. (2012a) (i.e., “enjoy chocolate”), but in the present studies, consumers do not benefit from compliance with brand commands because I purposely exclude commands that offer a prize or discount in exchange for compliance.

Mind attribution to humans and non-humans

The ability to correctly and rapidly identify agents with minds and understand the contents of such minds is what enables an individual to communicate and coordinate with other people (Epley and Waytz 2009). However, understanding other minds is challenging, because access to them is inherently more ambiguous than access to our own minds (Gray, Young and Waytz 2012). The best we can do is infer the presence and states of other minds based on an agent's features and actions.

Attributing or denying minds to others is an effortless determination that often occurs at an implicit level (Epley, Schroeder and Waytz 2013). Thus, people may sometimes see a mind, as when they say their computer is out to get them, and sometimes choose not to, as when they ascribe less complex emotions to out-group members than in-group members (see Haslam 2006 for an overview). Researchers in this area have sought to identify the circumstances and cues that lead a perceiver to conclude that a mind is present and to determine its contents (Epley and Waytz 2009; Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007; Ward, Olsen and Wegner 2013).

Displaying or expressing intentions is one characteristic that leads to mind attribution. Agents that appear to have intentions are attributed more mind (Epley and Waytz 2009; Kozak et al. 2006; Waytz et al. 2010b). The dangers posed by intentional agents (e.g., a bear vs. a rock that looks like a bear) have led some evolutionary theorists to argue that humans have a bias to see agents as intentional because it is a safer assumption (Guthrie 1993, Rosset 2008). Rosset has demonstrated that a wide variety of unintentional actions are perceived as intentional and that effortful thought is required to correct this perception (2008).

Although brands are inanimate objects that do not actually possess intentions, Kervyn, Fiske and Malone (2012) show that people nonetheless attribute intentions to brands, and

furthermore that they differentially attribute warm vs. cold intentions (that is, positive vs. negative aims) as well as greater or lesser competence in carrying out those intentions based on firm characteristics. These attributions occur according the same stereotype content model that regulates attribution of intentions to other humans. For example, charities have been shown to have warm intentions by both Kervyn and colleagues (2012) and Aaker, Vohs and Mogilner (2010), while cold intentions are ascribed to a harmful brand (e.g., a cigarette manufacturer, Kervyn et al. 2012). While a more effortful consideration might lead a person to conclude that a brand or product does not have actually have intentions or a mind, consumers clearly demonstrate the bias toward seeing these entities as intentional that scholars have previously posited (Guthrie 1993, Rosset 2008).

Some marketing research has used intentions expressed by products to manipulate anthropomorphism. For example, Puzakova et al. (2013) use product advertisements in which the product is described with first person language (e.g., “I am the most reliable ...) rather than third person language (e.g., “It is the most reliable ...). Similarly Aggarwal and McGill (2012) use the brand’s expression of an intention to be a servant or partner to manipulate anthropomorphism. In the present research, I use assertive language to manipulate the perception of brand intentions, because the intention to control the target is more apparent when the agent uses assertive language. Polite language expresses less intention to control, because it leaves open the possibility that the target may not wish to comply and it is vague as to exactly who is being commanded to act (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Brand care and concern

An important outcome of mind attribution is care and concern for entities that possess a mind. Mind attribution occurs along a continuum, and as an observer attributes more mind to an agent,

he also extends greater care and concern to the agent (Epley and Waytz 2009; Waytz, Epley and Cacioppo 2010a). This is because an agent that possesses a mind is aware of his experiences and emotions and thus feels more suffering and harm as a result of wrongdoing (Epley and Waytz 2009; Gray et al. 2012). Thus, harming an agent with more mind (e.g., a human) is a worse offense than purposely harming an agent with less or no mind (e.g., a tree) (Ward et al. 2013). In cases in which the agent does not actually have a mind, but is only attributed a mind, intentional harm will nonetheless strike an observer as more objectionable than intentional harm to an agent with no attributed mind (ibid.).

A likely boundary condition for this relationship, however, is that minds that are negatively perceived will not elicit increased care and concern. Decreased care and concern for other humans is associated with various social ills, such as dehumanization and discrimination (Haslam 2006). While this often happens for outgroup members (ibid.), disliked others are also denied minds, which decreases care and concern for them (Kozak et al. 2006). Thus, a brand that behaves in a manner perceived as threatening or malevolent toward consumers is not likely to be the recipient of care and concern. This is an important distinction as it suggests that some brand personalities or associations may not be able to benefit from the positive effects of assertive language.

Brand and product anthropomorphism

In marketing research, investigation of brand anthropomorphism has often relied on human-like product forms (i.e., car grilles that look like frowning faces or a bottle shaped like a human body, Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Kim and McGill 2011; Puzakova et al. 2013) or behaviors (i.e., the brand expresses an intention to serve as a partner or servant, Aggarwal and McGill 2012). While such anthropomorphism manipulations cause the brand or product to appear humanlike,

consumers may not take the additional step of attributing a mind to the agent. Nor is mind attribution explicitly measured in this literature. Furthermore, some marketing research that considers the brand as a para-social entity with intentions, capable of relationships, or possessing a personality could be argued to imply the presence of a mind. For example, research on brand intentions (Aggarwal and McGill 2012; Kervyn, et al. 2012) suggests some level of mind attribution by consumers because the brand must be an organ capable of forming an intention. Similarly, the construct of brand personality (Aaker 1997, 1999; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004) can also be argued to assume the presence of a mind because some organ must generate and host the traits that comprise a personality.

However mind attribution to brands and products is an area deserving of greater attention by marketing scholars. Little to no marketing anthropomorphism research explicitly measures mind attribution to brands or products by consumers. Neither has there been a systematic exploration of the antecedents and consequences of mind attribution to brands or products. Finally, the assumption that a product or brand is like a person or has a humanlike mind likely occurs at an unconscious level in most circumstances. This means that consumers are not aware of this attribution or of its effects on their behavior, leaving them unable to correct for it. Mind attribution to brands and products is thus an area deserving of further investigation.

HYPOTHESES

Nature of assertive language

In this research, investigation of the effects of assertive language is limited to commands or instructions given by the brand to cause an individual to perform a specified action. I do not include efforts to persuade consumers by convincing them of the merit, appeal, or value of the

action, as the literature defines such actions as more polite than a command to act (Wilson and Kunkel 2000). I also do not include commands that include inducements to act, such as discounts, prizes, or rewards as this confounds the reason for the target's compliance or non-compliance. In such instances, we cannot be certain whether consumers' assessment of such commands is motivated by the potential reward or by mind attribution and brand care and concern.

Although prior research on assertive language has focused mainly on its effects on compliance, this work ignores the issue of compliance entirely. Consumer responses to assertive language commands could include a number of possible outcomes, ranging from complying in earnest, to ignoring the request, to responding in a manner intended to register annoyance or displeasure. For example, a women's clothing brand may instruct customers to post to Facebook a photo of an outfit from the brand. A few consumers would comply with this request and post a photo, most would ignore the request entirely, and some would respond by posting a photo of an extremely unattractive outfit as a means of registering displeasure or protest with the request. Discerning between these three responses cannot be done with any certainty short of consumers directly expressing their intentions.

Additionally, whether the individual would have performed this behavior in absence of the assertive language does not matter. In fact, reactance theory suggests that it is the loss of choice that elicits reactance, rather than the desirability of the action, so that even a desired option can become less appealing when other options are removed. In Brehm's (1966) example, if a consumer goes to the vending machine seeking a particular product, but the vending machine malfunctions and dispenses the product before the consumer selects it, desire and liking for the

product will be reduced. Thus, a command to perform an action could be expected to reduce the appeal of an action that a consumer intended to carry out as well as one he did not.

Related literature

The assertive language construct is related to, but distinct from, the construct of power. Power is defined as the possibility of influencing others (Bacharach and Lawler 1981; Handgraaf et al. 2008; Kelley and Thibault 1978). Such a definition suggests that an agent only has power to the extent that he successfully influences others. However, for the purpose of mind attribution, it only matters that a consumer observes an assertive language command, not that he complies with it. Since the present work does not differentiate between attempting to influence others and actually influencing them, it is broader than the construct of power. Nonetheless, for the sake of thoroughness, I do rule out the explanation that assertive language influences perceptions of brand power in experiment 1a.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature examined above, this research tests five hypotheses regarding the effects of assertive language commands issued by brands. The first hypothesis holds that evaluations of assertive language commands themselves are likely to be negative, because most people respond negatively to such language. Assertive language commands are face-threatening acts that yield a number of negative outcomes, including displeasure and negative emotions (Quick and Considine 2008).

The second hypothesis holds that brands that use assertive (vs. polite) language will be more likely to be attributed a mind. Prior work has established that people rely on particular cues when determining whether an agent has a mind. Intentional behavior is one such cue (Epley and Waytz 2009; Epley et al. 2007; Waytz et al. 2010b; Waytz et al. 2010c), and commands

delivered with assertive language suggest that the speaker intends to control the target (Brown and Levinson 1987; Kellerman and Shea 1996; Quick and Considine 2008). Commands delivered with polite language, however, attempt to mask the presence of controlling intentions.

The third hypothesis holds that when a brand employs assertive language, the consumer will grant it greater care and concern, which is defined as a negative feelings in response to harm done to the brand, positive feelings in response to benefits received by the brand, as well as increased willingness to provide help or assistance to the brand. Humans experience suffering and distress when harm is done to them because they have mental capacities for self-awareness and emotional experience (Gray et al. 2012; Ward et al. 2013). When a brand is attributed a mind, the inferred capacity for self-awareness and emotional experience makes it seem more egregious to harm it (vs. harming a brand with no mind). Similarly, denying assistance to a brand with a mind will seem worse than denying assistance to a brand without a mind.

Formally stated, the first three hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Commands issued by a brand using assertive (vs. polite) language will be evaluated negatively by consumers.

H2: Brands that employ assertive language will be attributed mind to a greater extent than those that use polite language.

H3: Brands that are attributed more mind will elicit greater care and concern than brands that are attributed less mind.

See figure 2 for a process model of these hypotheses.

--Insert figure 2 approximately here--

In order to further refine the understanding of the theorized relationship, I examine the mediating role of mind attribution by manipulating it directly. I also explore a boundary condition under which the proposed effect may be attenuated. I theorize that the valence of the brand's mind—whether it behaves in a threatening (vs. helpful) way toward consumers—will

moderate the effects of assertive language, attenuating the relationship between mind attribution and brand care and concern.

Hypothesis 4 concerns the effects of directly manipulating the mediator, in an effort to provide support for the mediating role of mind attribution. Individuals whose tendency to mentalize an agent—that is consider the state or content of its mind—has been enhanced (Abell, Happé and Frith 2000; Castelli et al. 2000; Klein et al. 2009; Zwickel 2009) should be more likely to attribute a mind to a brand when it displays intentional behavior. Concomitant brand care and concern should likewise increase. When mentalizing tendencies are dampened, the relationship between assertive language and mind attribution and care and concern will be attenuated, and individuals should see the brand as possessing less mind regardless of the type of language it uses.

Hypothesis 5a holds that the valence of the mind attributed to the brand will moderate the relation between assertive language and mind attribution. Brands that seem threatening or harmful (such as those that provide a product that harms consumers, e.g., cigarettes) may be attributed minds that are likewise negatively valenced (Kervyn et al. 2012). The combination of such negative behaviors and assertive language should lead to increased mind attribution. This is because threatening or dangerous agents should be attributed greater mind in order to help individuals respond appropriately to the danger they present (Guthrie 1993; Rosset 2008) and this perception should be enhanced by the fact that its behaviors seems consistent with its overall personality (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel 2004). When a brand has a mind that seems helpful or benevolent (such as a brand that offers aid, e.g., the Red Cross), it should be attributed a mind that is positively valenced (Kervyn et al. 2012). However, there should be less need to attribute a

mind to a brand with a benevolent mind, regardless of the type of language it uses, because such minds pose little threat.

Hypothesis 5b holds that mind valence will decouple the relationship between mind attribution and brand care and concern. Just as a person with negative traits or qualities should elicit less care and concern, a brand with a malevolent mind or negative intentions should also be less likely to elicit care and concern (Kozak et al. 2006). Brands with negative minds should thus be less likely to benefit from care and concern from consumers, even though they are attributed more mind. Brands with positive minds should demonstrate a pattern of care and concern that parallels their levels of mind attribution.

Formally stated, hypotheses 4 and 5a and b are as follows:

H4: Directly manipulating mind attribution by altering mentalizing tendencies should moderate the proposed relationship. Specifically, enhanced mentalizing should increase the likelihood of attributing a mind to the brand on the basis of controlling intentions expressed by assertive language. This will also increase brand care and concern. Among individuals for whom mentalizing tendencies are dampened, mind attribution and brand care and concern will be less likely in response to assertive language.

H5a: Mind valence should moderate the relationship between assertive language and mind attribution such that when a brand with a negative mind displays a controlling intention via assertive language, it will be attributed more mind. A brand with a positive mind should not differ in the level of mind attributed to it, regardless of the language it uses.

H5b: Mind valence should decouple the relationship between mind attribution and brand care and concern. A brand with a negative mind will not benefit from increased care and concern regardless of the type of language it uses. A brand with a positive mind should have a level of care and concern consistent with its level of mind attribution.

See Figure 3 for a conceptual model of all hypotheses.

--Insert Figure 3 approximately here--

EXPERIMENTS

Five experiments provide evidence of the relationship between assertive language and brand care and concern, as well as the mechanism that links them (mind attribution) and a boundary condition (mind valence).

Pilot experiment

The purpose of the pilot experiment was to provide preliminary evidence of the hypothesized relationship between assertive language and brand care and concern. Participants were 92 members of an online panel (U.S. residents, 52 percent male, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.29$) who participated in exchange for a small payment. Standard errors for the care and concern dependent variable were examined for outliers exceeding 2.5 standard deviations above the mean in all experiments. However, no outliers were identified in this experiment; thus all participants were retained for analysis.

Individuals were randomly assigned to see a brand employ assertive language ($n=47$) or polite language ($n=45$). A cover story explained that Barnes & Noble was testing the effectiveness of a new email campaign. In both conditions, the text included the language “Barnes & Noble is offering special customers unprecedented deals during the month of June! Incredible savings on almost everything in our stores and online.” In the assertive language condition, it also included the command “You are required to forward this email to at least two friends.” In the polite language condition, this command was worded more politely: “Please help us spread the word about these great deals by forwarding our email to at least two friends.” Time spent on the stimuli page was measured unobtrusively. See Appendix 1 for sample stimuli. Participants then answered survey questions regarding their attitudes toward the brand and care and concern for the brand. Manipulation check items regarding the assertiveness of the command

were administered at the end of the experiment in order to avoid influencing responses to other items. Demographic variables were also collected.

Assertive language response. Three items ($\alpha=.80$) evaluated participants' response to the marketing message on a 7-point scale (strongly disagree–strongly agree). The items included overall liking for the brand and intentions to visit a Barnes & Noble store and to visit its website. An ANOVA with the items as the outcome and language condition as factor was significant ($F(1, 90) = 13.46, p < .001$). Participants who saw the brand employ assertive language had more negative responses than did participants who saw it employ polite language ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.00, M_{\text{polite}} = 5.02, t(90) = 3.69, p < .001$). This result replicates prior findings from the assertive language literature demonstrating that people respond negatively to such commands (Brown and Levinson 1987; Dillard and Shen 2005; Kellerman and Shea 1996; Quick and Considine 2008).

Brand care and concern. Brand care and concern for the brand was assessed with two separate items (the inter-item reliability—.32—indicated that the items do not measure the same construct and thus should not be analyzed together). First, participants were asked how they would feel (1) overhearing someone describing embezzling from the brand (reverse coded) and (2) being asked for a donation to help the brand stay in business. Responses were measured on a 7-point scale in which 1 indicated very unhappy and 7 very happy. ANOVAs with each item as the dependent variable and language condition as the factor were supportive. For (1) the results were significant ($F(1, 90) = 7.08, p < .01; M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.11, M_{\text{polite}} = 4.36, t(90) = 2.66, p < .01$) and for (2) they were marginally significant ($F(1, 90) = 2.78, p < .10; M_{\text{assertive}} = 6.25, M_{\text{polite}} = 5.80, t(90) = 1.67, p < .10$). As predicted, participants who saw the brand employ assertive language expressed greater care and concern for it than did participants who saw the brand employ polite language.

Alternative explanation. It is possible that participants who saw the brand use assertive language either spent more time evaluating the stimuli because it was unusual and more involving, or they spent less time evaluating the stimuli because the assertive language was displeasing to read. To rule out the explanation that differences in processing time or involvement account for these results, I conducted an ANOVA to compare stimuli time across conditions. The ANOVA was not significant, nor was there a statistically significant difference in stimuli time across conditions ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 24.10$, $M_{\text{polite}} = 13.22$, $F(1,90) = 1.70$, $p < .19$). I also examined whether stimuli time predicted responses to (1) the embezzling or (2) the donation items. However, it did not in either case: (1) $\beta = -.07$, $t(90) = -.69$, $p > .49$ and (2) $\beta = .001$, $t(90) = -.01$, $p > .99$.

Discussion. Results of the pilot experiment suggest that consumers have greater care and concern for a brand that uses assertive (vs. polite) language. This is true despite the fact that participants have reduced shopping intentions and brand liking in response to assertive (vs. polite) language. In experiment 1a and 1b, I attempt to replicate this finding with an alternate manipulation of assertive language and different brands. Both studies also include a measure of mind attribution to the brand and test for its role as a mediating variable. Finally the studies measure brand care and concern with both self-reported scales (1a) and actual behavior (1b).

Experiment 1a

Experiment 1a had several goals. First, it sought to replicate the previous effects using an alternate manipulation of assertive language in which participants could actually comply with the request during the experiment. Second, it used a different brand, product category, and context to demonstrate the generalizability of the effect. Third, it measured mind attribution to the brand,

which is hypothesized to be the mechanism through which assertive language leads to brand care and concern. I also sought statistical evidence of the mediating role of mind attribution.

Participants were 99 members of an online panel (U.S. residents, 52.5 percent male, $M_{age} = 36.06$) who completed the study in exchange for a small payment. One outlier was excluded (standard error exceeded 2.5 standard deviations above the mean for the care and concern dependent variable), leaving a total of 98 participants.

Individuals were randomly assigned to the assertive ($n=44$) or polite ($n=55$) language conditions. A cover story explained that Chilis, a national chain of casual dining restaurants, was evaluating a social media campaign. In the assertive language condition the command was worded, “You should tweet a detailed description of the best food you ever ate at Chilis. You need to tag it #bestfood #chilis #mmmm.” The polite command was worded, “Please tweet a description of the best food you ever ate at Chilis. You can tag it #bestfood #chilis #mmmm.” See Appendix 2 for sample stimuli. Participants were given an opportunity to respond to the tweet, although no analysis was conducted on the responses. After viewing the stimulus, participants answered responded to mind attribution and brand care and concern items. See appendix 3 for a list of items used to measure mediating variables and appendix 4 for items measuring dependent variables. Demographic variables were also collected.

Manipulation check and alternative explanations. A pre-test was conducted with 64 participants from the same online panel, who completed the study in exchange for a small payment. Participants viewed the Chilis stimulus before answering manipulation check items, as well as items to rule out alternative explanations (perceptions of brand power and thoughts about brand employees). The manipulation check was a 4-item scale regarding the extent to which the Chilis tweet was assertive, controlling, bossy, and pushy ($\alpha=.80$). An ANOVA with the

manipulation check scale as the outcome and language condition as factor was just above traditional significance levels ($F(1, 62) = 3.71, p < .06$). As intended, the assertive language command was perceived as more assertive, controlling, bossy and assertive than the polite language version ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.26, M_{\text{polite}} = 4.52, t(63) = 1.96, p < .06$).

Perceptions of brand power. One alternative explanation of these results is that assertive language leads consumers to infer that the brand is more powerful than does polite language, and thus more deserving of respect or deference. Because the brand care and concern outcome could also be construed as indicating respect for the brand, these results may be driven by differential perceptions of brand power. To rule out this explanation, I also administered a six-item scale assessing brand power (Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky 2010) that included evaluations of the brand is influential, independent, a leader, dependent (reverse coded), unimportant (reverse coded), and subordinate (reverse coded) ($\alpha = .72$). An ANOVA with the brand power scale as the outcome and language condition as factor was not significant ($F(1, 62) = .00, p < .99$). There was no difference in evaluations of brand power across language condition ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.03, M_{\text{polite}} = 5.03, t(63) = .00, p > .99$).

Thoughts about brand employees. Another potential alternative explanation is that assertive language (vs. polite language) might make the brand's employees more salient (perhaps because consumers to think that the people managing the brand's social media accounts are doing a poor job). This might imply that the mind being attributed is to the brand employee rather than the brand itself. To rule out this explanation, participants were asked to what extent the stimuli caused them to think about brand employees (items about the extent to which they think about the brand's reputation, products, and advertising were also included to mask the focal item). An ANOVA with the employee item as the outcome and language condition as factor was

not significant ($F(1, 62) = .10, p > .75$). Thus, there was no difference across conditions in the extent to which participants thought about brand employees ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 3.32, M_{\text{polite}} = 3.15, t(63) = .32, p > .75$).

Mind attribution. In the main study, mind attribution to the brand was assessed with 3 items adapted from Ward et al. (2013). The items included that the brand can “experience pleasure,” “understands the thoughts and emotions of others,” and “understands right versus wrong” ($\alpha = .89$). An ANCOVA with mind attribution as the dependent variable and condition as the factor was significant ($F(1, 95) = 18.53, p < .001$). A single item tapping past purchase behavior toward the brand was also included to account for brand knowledge and experience, since Chilis is a real brand. The covariate was also significant ($F(1, 95) = 21.23, p < .001$). Participants in the assertive language condition attributed more mind to the brand than did participants in the polite language condition ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.24, M_{\text{polite}} = 2.98, t(97) = 4.30, p < .001$).

Brand care and concern. Care and concern for the brand was assessed with a 3-item scale ($\alpha = .69$), and this scale was used in all studies except the pilot at study 1b. The items asked how participants would feel overhearing someone praising the brand, as well as how likely they would be to share the brand’s post on their own social media page or write a positive review of the brand in an online review forum. These items were selected because they represent activities that consumers would more commonly engage in versus the items included in the pilot study.

An ANCOVA with brand care and concern items as the dependent variable, language condition as the factor, and past purchase as a covariate revealed that language condition was marginally significant ($F(1, 95) = 2.65, p < .11$) and the covariate was significant ($F(1, 95) = 23.11, p < .001$). As predicted, participants in the assertive language condition expressed greater

brand care and concern than did participants in the polite language condition ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 3.99$, $M_{\text{polite}} = 3.67$, $t(97) = 1.63$, $p < .11$).

Statistical mediation. Mediation was assessed using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro to test for evidence of statistical mediation according to the method described by Zhao et al. (2010). The mean indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis is positive and significant ($a \times b = .38$), with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval excluding zero (.15 and .72). The mean direct effect is marginally significant ($c = .32$, $p = .10$), although the 95% bootstrap confidence interval includes zero (-.07 and .71). This is evidence of indirect-only mediation (Zhao et al. 2010). A Sobel test also revealed evidence of mediation ($Z = 3.19$, $p < .001$).

Discussion. The results of experiment 1a suggest that when a brand employs assertive language it is the beneficiary of increased care and concern and that the mechanism by which this occurs is mind attribution. It also rules out alternative explanations for this effect, such as differences in perceived brand power or thoughts about brand employees. Experiment 1b uses an alternate measure of mind attribution as well as a behavioral (rather than self-reported) measure of brand care and concern. It also employs a fictitious brand and a new product category in order to show the generalizability of the effect.

Experiment 1b

Experiment 1b had several main goals, in addition to replicating the results of experiment 1a. First, it uses a behavioral measure of brand care and concern by offering participants an opportunity to provide support to the brand rather than self-reporting brand care and concern. Second, it uses a new product category and a fictitious brand to show the generalizability of the effect and to ensure that the results of the previous studies are not the result of participants'

existing associations for particular brands. This study also uses an alternate manipulation of assertive language and measures mind attribution with a different scale.

In this experiment, the stimulus was a Twitter post from Café Athene, a fictitious European coffee chain considering expansion to the United States. In the assertive language condition, the tweet read, “Show us what you look like before your morning coffee! You should post before and after photos! Be sure to @ us. You need to tag it #beforeandafter.” In the polite language condition, the tweet read, “What do you look like before your morning coffee? Please post before and after photos. You can @ us! You can also tag it #beforeandafter.” See Appendix 5 for sample stimuli.

Participants were 65 undergraduate business students at Indiana University (59 percent male, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.29$). Respondents who indicated their future purchase intentions for the brand were below the scale midpoint were excluded as they may have doubted the cover story or may not find the product category relevant. Thus, 44 participants were retained for analyses. However, results are not substantively different when all participants are included. Participants were randomly assigned to assertive ($n = 22$) or polite language condition ($n = 22$).

After viewing the stimulus, participants answered questions about mind attribution to the brand. Next participants were asked to help the brand by evaluating photos for various uses (i.e., social media accounts, wall art, menus, etc.). In this task, (adapted from Reeves and Nass (1996), participants have an opportunity to provide as much or as little assistance to the brand as they would like. Each photo was rated on a 7-point scale (definitely use–definitely do not use). After each rating, participants elected to evaluate another photo or end the photo rating task, up to a maximum of 20 photos. Following the photo rating task, brand evaluations and demographic variables were collected. Lastly, participants completed two scales designed to rule out

alternative explanations: one related to unexpectedness of the stimuli and one related to personal feelings of power.

Mind attribution. Mind attribution was measured with 3 items ($\alpha = .78$). Two were adapted from Ward et al. (2013): the brand is conscious of itself and understands the thoughts and emotions of others. A third item tapped overall perceptions of anthropomorphism by asking whether it was easy to imagine the kind of person the brand would be if it were a human being (Kim and McGill 2011). An ANOVA with mind attribution as the dependent variable and language condition as the factor was significant, although just above the level of traditional significance values ($F(1, 43) = 3.83, p < .06$). As predicted, participants who saw the brand employ assertive language attributed more mind to the brand than did participants who saw the brand employ polite language ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.46, M_{\text{polite}} = 3.80, t(43) = 1.96, p < .06$).

Brand care and concern. Brand care and concern was measured by the number of photos rated by each participant, with participants who rated more photographs demonstrating greater care and concern for the brand. An ANOVA with this number as the dependent variable and language condition as the factor was significant ($F(1, 43) = 5.31, p < .05$). As predicted, participants who saw the brand employ assertive language rated more photos, and thus engaged in supportive behavior to a greater extent than did participants who saw the brand employ polite language ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 10.18, M_{\text{polite}} = 5.46, t(43) = 2.30, p < .05$).

In order to determine whether participants were more critical or complimentary in their photo ratings across the two language conditions, an ANOVA with average photo rating as the dependent variable and language condition as the factor was conducted. The ANOVA was not significant ($F(1, 43) = 1.26, p > .26$). Thus, the average photo ratings did not differ by condition.

This suggests that participants were equally honest in their evaluations and only differed in the extent to which they provided assistance to the brand.

Mediation. Mediation was assessed using the bootstrap method described in study 1a. However, the results were not supportive of mediation and are reported only for consistency with prior analyses. The mean indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis is negative and not significant ($a \times b = -.01$), with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval including zero (-1.02 and .68). The mean direct effect is positive and significant ($c = 3.80$), and the 95% bootstrap confidence interval includes zero (.75 and 6.86). A Sobel test similarly failed to indicate mediation ($Z = -.02, p > .97$).

Alternative explanations. One possible alternative explanation for these results is that participants anthropomorphize the brand because it behaves in an unexpected way. There is evidence that agents that behave unpredictably are more likely to be anthropomorphized or attributed a mind (Epley et al. 2007; Waytz et al. 2010c). Unexpected behavior was assessed using a 3-item scale from Kronrod et al. (2012a) (whether the stimuli was typical, expected, and standard, $\alpha = .76$). An ANOVA with the unexpectedness scale as the dependent variable and language condition as a factor was marginally significant ($F(1, 43) = 3.00, p > .09$). However, the mean unexpectedness ratings were opposite of the alternative account. That is, the politely worded command was rated as more unexpected than the assertively worded command ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 6.27, M_{\text{polite}} = 5.50, p > .09$). Thus, unexpectedness does not seem to drive the results.

Another possible alternative explanation is that the assertive language causes participants to feel a loss of control and creates an effectance motivation. The literature identifies effectance motivations as an antecedent of anthropomorphism, as an individual motivated to understand or control a target is more likely to attribute a mind to it (Waytz et al. 2010c). To rule out this

explanation, I compared participants' ratings on a 2-item scale ($\alpha = .89$) from Kay et al. (2008). Participants agreed or disagreed with the statements, "to a great extent my life is controlled by accidental happenings" and "the things that occur in my life are mostly a matter of chance." An ANOVA with this scale as the outcome and language condition as the factor was not significant ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 3.75$, $M_{\text{polite}} = 3.50$, $F(1, 43) = .30$, $p > .58$).

Discussion. In summary, participants who were exposed to a brand that employed assertive language evaluated the brand as more humanlike. They also demonstrated greater brand care and concern by engaging in an actual behavior supportive of the brand (rather than self-reporting brand care and concern). This result held for a fictitious brand, suggesting that the prior results are not the result of some existing associations participants have for real brands. This result was also not due to the unexpectedness of the brand's command nor effectance motivations. In experiment 2, I examine the process role of mind attribution by manipulating mind attribution directly (Spencer et al. 2005). I also employ a new brand and product category to further extend the generalizability of the results.

Experiment 2

This experiment is intended to provide additional evidence of the mechanism at work by directly manipulating the mediator (Spencer et al. 2005). Specifically, when participants are encouraged to mentalize an agent, by thinking about his or her mental states, they should be more likely to conclude that intentional behavior signifies the presence of a humanlike mind. They will also be more likely to express care and concern for the brand. However, when mentalizing tendencies are dampened, the controlling intentions expressed by assertive language will not lead participants to conclude a human mind is present, which will also depress care and concern for

the brand. Additionally, by using research participants who were not residents of the United States, this experiment provides some evidence that the results are more broadly generalizable.

Procedure. The experiment relies upon a 2 (mentalizing: enhanced vs. dampened) x 2 (language: assertive vs. polite) between subjects design. Participants were 129 members of an online research panel (residents of India, 66 percent male, $M_{age} = 32$) who participated in exchange for a small payment. One outlier with a standard error exceeding 2.5 standard deviations above the mean was excluded, so that 128 participants were retained for analysis.

Mentalizing manipulation. First, in order to manipulate mentalizing tendencies, participants viewed one of two 40-second animated clips previously established in the literature (Abell et al. 2000; Castelli et al. 2000; Klein et al. 2009; Zwickel 2009). In the enhanced mentalizing condition, the video shows one triangle trying to coax another triangle out of the box and then dancing with it. As participants attempt to understand the shapes' actions and intentions, they adopt a frame of mind in which they devote more attention to understanding others' mental states. In the dampened mentalizing condition, the clip shows two triangles circling a box in a random fashion. Both videos involve simple line drawings with minimal color or detail. A cover story instructed participants that the video was from a new software being evaluated by researchers in the informatics department. They were asked to describe what they saw in the video and, for consistency with the cover story, any problems they noted.

A pre-test established that this manipulation worked as intended. Sixty-two participants from the same subject pool received the same viewing instructions for the clip as participants in the main study. After viewing the clip, they completed a shortened version of the cognitive empathy scale, which measures individuals' perceptions of how well they understand others' mental states (Jolliffe and Farrington 2006). The four-item scale ($\alpha = .82$) included the following

items: I am good at predicting how someone will feel, I am good at predicting what someone will do, I can easily tell if someone is else is interested or bored with what I am saying, and I can pick up quickly if someone says one thing but means another. An ANOVA with this scale as the outcome and mentalizing manipulation as the factor was significant ($F(1, 62) = 4.97, p < .05$). The analysis confirmed that participants who viewed the enhanced mentalizing clip scored higher on the scale than did participants who viewed the dampened mentalizing clip ($M_{\text{enhanced mentalizing}} = 5.17, M_{\text{dampened mentalizing}} = 4.64, t(63) = 2.23, p < .05$).

Assertive language manipulation. After viewing the animated clip, participants were exposed to the assertive language manipulation, ostensibly as part of a separate study. The language manipulation was identical to the one used in the pilot experiment, but adapted to the Gap clothing brand. Following administration of the stimuli, mind attribution and brand care and concern items were administered. Demographic items were also collected. An open-ended probe was also included to determine whether participants had guessed the purpose of the experiment. However, none of the participants accurately described the purpose of the study, suggesting the results are not due to demand effects.

Mind attribution. Mind attribution was measured using the three-item scale from study 1a ($\alpha = .76$). As predicted, participants whose mentalizing tendencies were enhanced were more likely to attribute a mind to the brand on the basis of assertive language. Participants whose mentalizing tendencies were dampened were less likely to attribute a mind to the brand on the basis of assertive language.

An ANCOVA with mind attribution as the outcome and mentalizing tendencies and language conditions as factors was significant ($F(1, 127) = 4.69, p = .001$). Past purchase behavior was included as a covariate and was significant ($F(1, 127) = 13.00, p < .001$). There was

no main effect of mentalizing tendency ($F(1, 127) = .15, p > .70$) nor of language condition ($F(1, 127) = .38, p > .54$), however the interaction between the two was significant ($F(1, 127) = 3.82, p = .05$). Planned comparisons revealed that when mentalizing tendencies were dampened, the use of assertive language resulted in less mind attribution than when mentalizing tendencies were enhanced, although this difference was only marginally statistically significant ($M_{\text{dampened mentalizing_assertive}} = 5.04, M_{\text{enhanced mentalizing_assertive}} = 5.46, p = .10$). Thus, intentional behavior in the video led participants to see the controlling intentions expressed in the assertive language condition as more indicative of a mind; while non-intentional behavior in the video made the assertive language condition appear less intentional, attenuating the effect of the assertive language. As expected, within the dampened mentalizing condition, there was no difference in mind attribution, regardless of the type of language used by the brand ($M_{\text{polite}} = 5.28, M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.04, p > .35$). Within the enhanced mentalizing condition, when the brand used assertive language, it was attributed more mind than when it used polite language, although this difference was slightly above traditional significance levels ($M_{\text{polite}} = 5.00, M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.46, p < .07$). The latter result was because when participants saw the triangles engaging in intentional behavior, they were more likely to view the controlling intentions expressed by the brand in the assertive language condition as evidence of a human-like mind. The lack of intention apparent in the polite language condition may have been made more apparent when contrasted with the intentional behavior observed in the video, further depressing mind attribution for participants in the enhanced mind attribution condition. These results are presented in figure 4.

--- Insert figure 4 approximately here ---

Brand care and concern. Brand care and concern was measured with the three-item scale ($\alpha = .76$). As predicted, the relationship between assertive language and brand care and

concern followed the same pattern as the relationship between assertive language and mind attribution. An ANCOVA with brand care and concern as the outcome and mentalizing tendencies and language condition as factors was significant ($F(1, 127) = 6.62, p < .001$). The past purchase covariate was also significant ($F(1, 127) = 17.99, p < .001$). There was no main effect of mentalizing tendency ($F(1, 127) = .05, p > .82$) nor of language condition ($F(1, 127) = 1.25, p > .27$), however the interaction between the two was significant ($F(1, 127) = 5.20, p < .05$). Planned comparisons revealed that when the brand used assertive language, participants whose mentalizing tendencies were enhanced expressed more brand care and concern than those whose mentalizing tendencies were dampened, although this difference was marginally significant ($M_{\text{enhanced mentalizing_assertive}} = 5.62, M_{\text{dampened mentalizing_assertive}} = 5.27, p < .15$). Within the dampened mentalizing condition, there was no difference in brand care and concern across language type ($M_{\text{polite}} = 5.47, M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.28, p > .41$). Within the enhanced mentalizing condition, brand care and concern was greater for the brand that used assertive language (versus polite) ($M_{\text{polite}} = 5.05, M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.62, p < .05$). Following the results for mind attribution, participants who saw intentional behavior in the video as part of the enhanced mind attribution condition expressed greater care and concern for the brand compared to those who saw no intentional behavior in the dampened condition. The non-intentional behavior in video seen in the dampened condition made the assertive language seem less intentional. As was the case for mind attribution, there was no difference in brand care and concern for the dampened condition—thus dampening mind attribution attenuated the link between assertive language and care and concern. However, in the enhanced mind attribution condition, the intentional behavior in the video made the controlling intention apparent in the assertive language condition more salient, leading to increased care and

concern. Likewise the lack of intention in the polite language condition may have also been more apparent, further depressing brand care and concern.

Discussion. The results of experiment 2 provide evidence of the process role of mind attribution by directly manipulating the mediator (Spencer et al. 2005). When participants are encouraged to mentalize agents, they are more likely to use intentional action as an indication of a humanlike mind. When mentalizing is dampened, however, intentional behavior does not lead them to conclude a human mind is present. This experiment also demonstrates that the results obtain for an Indian participant pool, thus generalizing the effect to participants outside the United States. In experiment 3, I examine a boundary condition of the relationship between assertive language, mind attribution, and brand care and concern. That is, when the mind attributed to the brand is threatening or harmful, does assertive language still result in brand care and concern?

Experiment 3

The purpose of experiment 3 was to explore a boundary condition of the relationship between assertive language, mind attribution, and brand care and concern. Specifically, this experiment examines the effects of mind attribution when the brand behaves in a threatening or harmful manner toward consumers. I predict that when controlling intentions are combined with a negatively valenced mind, such as mind with the goal of extracting maximum profits from consumers or selling them an unhealthy product, the result will be increased mind attribution. This is because the combined effect of the controlling intention and negative mind will create an effectance motivation to deal successfully with the agent, and effectance motivations have been shown to heighten mind attribution (Waytz et al. 2010a, 2010b). Additionally, the negative mind and controlling intentions appear to represent a match between the brand's personality and its

actions (Aaker, et al. 2004), which may also heighten mind attribution. However, a brand with a mind that is helpful and benevolent should be less likely to create an effectance motivation and thus is less likely to be attributed a mind.

Just as a human who appears threatening or harmful might be attributed a mind but not be the recipient of others' care and concern, I also predict that a brand that appears threatening or harmful will not be the recipient of consumers' care and concern. Thus, mind valence will decouple the relationship between mind attribution and care and concern for the brand. Thus, even though the brand is attributed more mind when it has a negative (vs. positive) mind and uses assertive (vs. polite) language, it will no longer be the beneficiary of increased care and concern from consumers.

Procedure. Participants were 163 members (U.S. residents, 53 percent male, $M_{\text{age}} = 37$) of an online panel who completed the experiment in exchange for a small payment. One outlier with a standard error more than 2.5 standard deviations above the mean of the brand care and concern variable was excluded, leaving a total of 162 participants.

Manipulation of mind valence. Participants first were randomly assigned to read a news article about a fictitious loan company called Flourish. In the negative mind condition, the company was described as a payday loan company. In the positive mind condition, it was described as a social loan company. After reading the description, participants were asked to write a one to two sentence summary of the information before proceeding with the study. The stimuli are presented in appendix 6.

A pretest was conducted to ensure that these descriptions influenced perceptions of mind valence as planned. Forty participants from the same subject pool as the main study reviewed the company descriptions and then answered three items regarding the extent to which the company

was good–bad, positive–negative, and appealing–unappealing ($\alpha = .93$, higher scores indicate more negative evaluations). An ANOVA with the manipulation check scale as the outcome and mind valence as a factor was significant ($F(1, 39) = 5.76, p < .05$). As predicted, the payday lender was perceived more negatively than the social lender ($M_{\text{payday}} = 4.74; M_{\text{social}} = 3.38, t(39) = 2.4, p < .05$).

Manipulation of assertive language. Participants were randomly assigned to the assertive or polite language condition, which was ostensibly for a Twitter campaign the company was considering that requested participants recount a time when a small loan helped them a lot (see Appendix 7 for the stimuli). After viewing the stimuli, participants responded to items regarding mind attribution items and brand care and concern, as well as brand liking. Demographic variables were collected last.

Mind attribution. Mind attribution was measured with the 3-item scale used in experiment 1b ($\alpha = .66$). As predicted, when the brand had negatively valenced mind and employed assertive language, this combined threat led to increased mind attribution compared to the condition in which the brand used polite language. When the brand had a positive mind, there was no difference in mind attribution across language type.

An ANCOVA with mind attribution as the outcome and mind valence and language type as factors was significant ($F(1, 161) = 2.71, p < .05$). Past experience with personal loan companies was used as a covariate (because the brand was fictitious, it was not possible to use past purchase experience with the brand). The covariate was marginally significant ($F(1, 161) = 3.45, p < .06$). There was no main effect of mind valence ($F(1, 161) = .00, p > .96$), but the main effect of language type was marginally significant ($F(1, 161) = 2.86, p > .10$). However the interaction between the two was significant ($F(1, 161) = 4.92, p < .05$). Planned comparisons

revealed a significant difference in mind attribution when the company had a negative mind and employed assertive language ($M_{\text{polite}} = 3.51$, $M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.32$, $p < .01$). However, when the brand had a positive mind, the difference in mind attribution was not significantly different ($M_{\text{polite}} = 3.96$, $M_{\text{assertive}} = 3.85$, $p > .70$). These results are presented in figure 5a.

--- Insert figure 5a and 5b approximately here ---

Brand care and concern. Brand care and concern was measured with the 3-item scale ($\alpha = .80$). As predicted, care and concern for the brand did not follow from greater mind attribution when the brand had a negative mind. Care and concern when the brand had a positive mind, however, followed a similar pattern to mind attribution. Thus I predict and find a main effect of mind valence for the care and concern outcome: positive minds should receive greater care and concern compared to negative minds.

An ANCOVA with brand care and concern as the outcome and mind valence and language type as factors was marginally significant ($F(1, 161) = 2.10$, $p = .08$). The past purchase covariate was significant ($F(1, 161) = 5.68$, $p < .05$). There main effect of mind valence was marginal ($F(1, 161) = 2.16$, $p = .14$), but there was no main effect of language type ($F(1, 161) = .33$, $p > .56$), nor was the interaction between the two significant ($F(1, 161) = .11$, $p > .74$). As predicted, none of the planned comparisons was significant ($M_{\text{negative mind_polite}} = 3.28$, $M_{\text{positive mind_polite}} = 3.49$, $M_{\text{negative mind_assertive}} = 3.33$, $M_{\text{positive mind_assertive}} = 3.65$, p 's $> .53$). Results are presented in figure 5b.

Discussion. The results of experiment 3 suggest that the valence of a mind attributed to a brand matters and that it decouples the relationship between mind attribution and brand care and concern. When the brand has a benevolent mind, there is no difference in mind attribution regardless of whether the brand uses assertive or polite language. However, when a negative

mind is combined with a negative act, specifically an assertive language command that conveys an intention to control, mind attribution is heightened (vs. a brand with negative mind using polite language). Importantly, mind valence also decouples the relationship between mind attribution and brand care and concern. That is, the type of mind attributed to a brand matters in order for consumers to have care and concern for the brand. A negative mind receives no enhanced care and concern, despite being attributed more mind.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In five experiments presented above, I show evidence that brands that employ assertive language are attributed more mind and thus elicit greater care and concern from consumers. This is the case despite the fact that the assertive language is evaluated negatively by consumers, resulting in decreased shopping intentions and brand liking. The studies described above make use of different brands (both real and fictitious), different product categories, and various manipulations of assertive language, which is suggestive of convergent validity and robustness of the effect. It also uses research participants from various pools (i.e., undergraduate students, U.S. Mturk members, and Indian Mturk members) to demonstrate that the effect is not limited to single culture or age group. The experiments also rule out several alternative explanations, including demand effects, involvement, unexpectedness, consumers' relative power, brand power, and thoughts about brand employees. This work offers theoretical contributions to the mind perception and anthropomorphism literatures generally, as well as brand anthropomorphism more specifically. It also has useful managerial insights.

Theoretical contribution

A growing body of marketing research suggests that brands are seen as human-like agents. Brands may be relationship partners (Fournier 1998), possess personalities (Aaker 1997, 1999; Aaker et al. 2004), and display intentions (Kervyn et al. 2012). Yet evidence is scant as to exactly how or why brands function in this agentic and semi-social capacity. This research helps to fill this gap by demonstrating that mind attribution is one mechanism by which brands seem agentic. Presumably there are many other means of eliciting mind attribution to brands beyond the one examined here, and this is an area for future investigation.

Marketing research often focuses on more explicit means of anthropomorphism in which product packaging or other marketing language is adopted that suggests a human-like form or other human-like qualities (such as having a face, or being described as a family; Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Kim and McGill 2011). As Chandler and Schwarz (2010) have pointed out, the outcomes generated by less subtle forms of anthropomorphism may be suspect because consumers may perceive some communicative intent when a brand that is rendered with human-like qualities. Specifically, consumers may assume that when a firm depicts the brand in a human-like manner, it is because the firm wishes to communicate the brand has some human-like qualities. However, the present work circumvents this issue by relying on linguistic style to suggest human-like traits. These findings are also interesting because, despite relying on a less explicit form of anthropomorphism (i.e., more subtle than a human form or face), mind attribution goes beyond these explicit forms to suggest a greater degree of humanness: not only does the brand *seem* humanlike, but the particular manner of its humanness is specified—the fact that it possesses a humanlike mind.

This work is also the first to show that assertive language is an antecedent of anthropomorphism. Given that the work on interpersonal compliance (Brown and Levinson

1987; Dillard and Shen 2005; Kellerman and Shea 1996; Quick and Considine 2008) and reactance (Dillard and Shen 2005; Fitzsimons and Lehman 2004) identify mainly drawbacks of assertive language, the finding that assertive language can lead to cooperative and supportive responses from consumers is novel. To some extent, the positive effects of assertive language that I observe may relate to the social media setting, and the fact that noncompliance creates minimal interpersonal friction (vs. noncompliance with an in-person assertive language command). However, the effects of assertive language remain regardless of compliance.

Additionally, this work follows the recommendation of Waytz and colleagues (2010a), who have argued that the study of social cognition should not be limited to the investigation of how other people are understood, but should also explore how non-human agents are understood. Investigating circumstances under which individuals grant humanity to non-persons (i.e., anthropomorphizing a brand) and deny humanity to real people (i.e., dehumanization) provides important insights that cannot be gleaned from the study of social cognition applied solely to humans.

Managerial contribution

Many firms already employ the assertive language examined in this research in their marketing efforts, especially in efforts to build engagement with consumers in social media contexts. It is therefore important to understand the full range of effects of such language. Anthropomorphism via mind attribution resulting from linguistic cues (as minimal as “you can” vs. “you must”) may also be of greater managerial interest than more traditional approaches that rely on human form or face as it is more readily implemented. The approach presented here does not require alterations to product packaging or brand image in order to benefit from the effects of mind attribution.

Additionally, the outcome of assertive language—brand care and concern—may be quite valuable to firms. In an era in which information is transmitted online at lightning speed, often before facts are fully available, many firms have been the victim of hoaxes or intentional misinformation that is widely distributed in a short period of time. Cultivating consumers who are resistant to spreading negative information or even inclined to defend the brand would therefore be a worthwhile aim. Finally, firms and marketers go to great effort to find clever ways to influence consumers while avoiding the use of assertive language. However, this research suggests that the dangers of assertive language may have been overstated.

Limitations and future research

The notion that consumers can be encouraged to attribute a mind to a brand, and thus see it as more humanlike and more deserving of care and concern offers a number of future directions for research. Assertive language employed by the brand is only one such means of encouraging mind attribution. Researchers should explore other means of encouraging consumers to attribute minds to brands.

This research is necessarily limited in its scope and therefore cannot fully explore the boundary effects of various brand traits on assertive language or of mind attribution. For example, differing brand personalities such as more sincere or more daring may be more or less likely to yield a mind attribution as a result of assertive language (Aaker 1997, 1999; Aaker et al. 2004). Another potential boundary condition lies in individual differences (e.g., consumer cultural orientation, age, gender) that could likewise lead to more or less mind attribution. I have not explored these differences in the present research, but they offer important insights to the mind attribution phenomenon. Lastly, this work restricted assertive language commands to instructions that are clearly linked to brand interests. But another interesting issue for future

research is how other type of commands may influences the consumer response. For example, do such consumption-related commands (i.e., “like a picture of our product”) differ from pro-social commands (i.e., “like our charity”)?

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

Figure 1: Examples of assertive language by firms

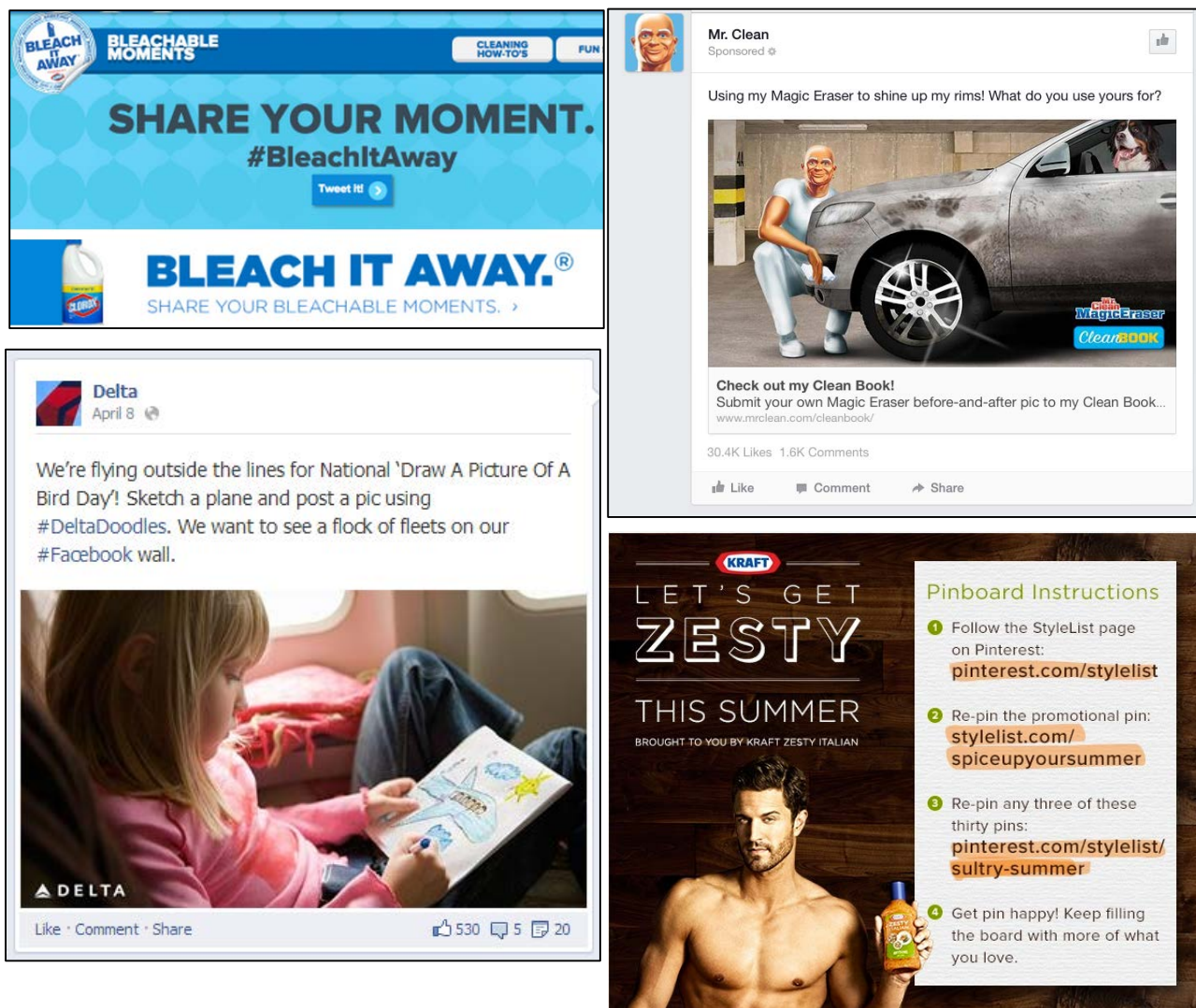


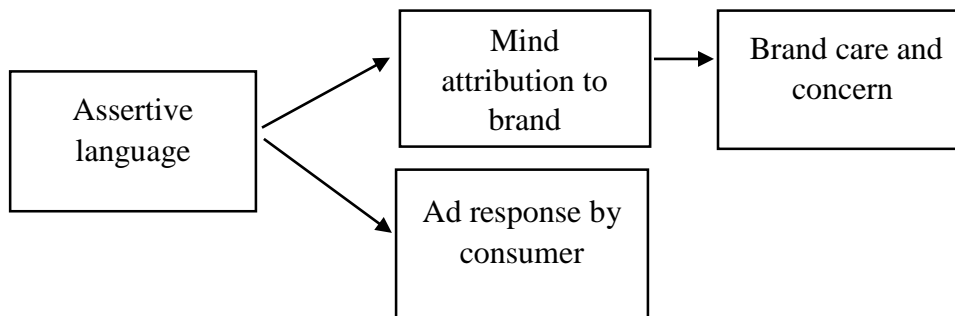
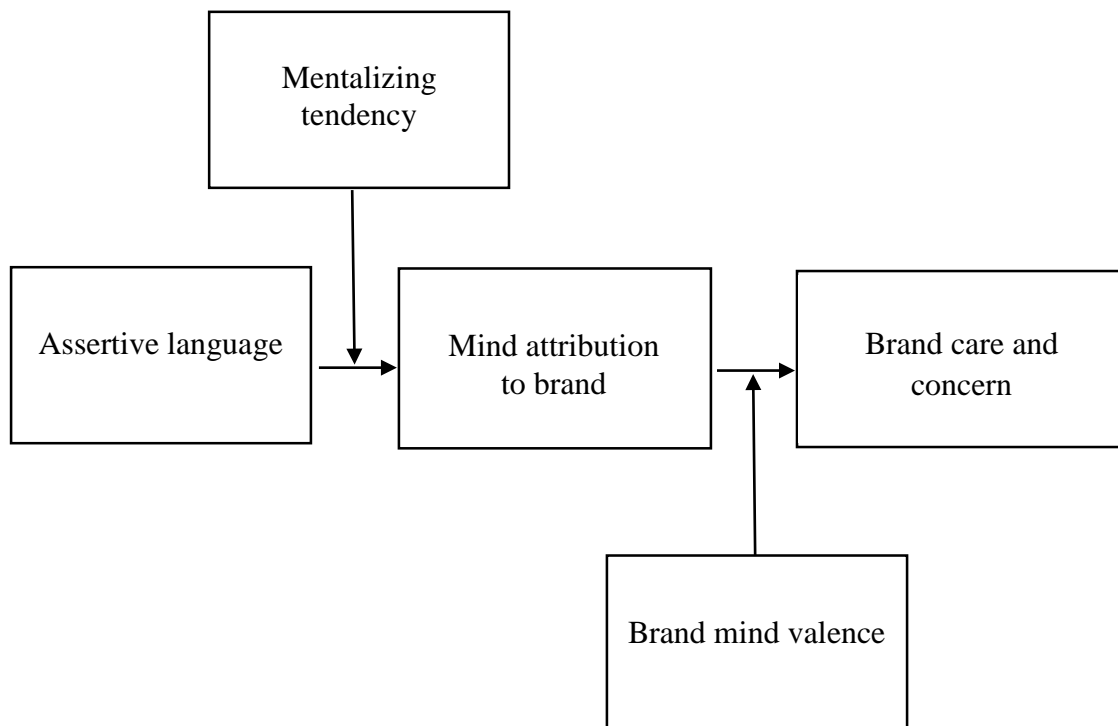
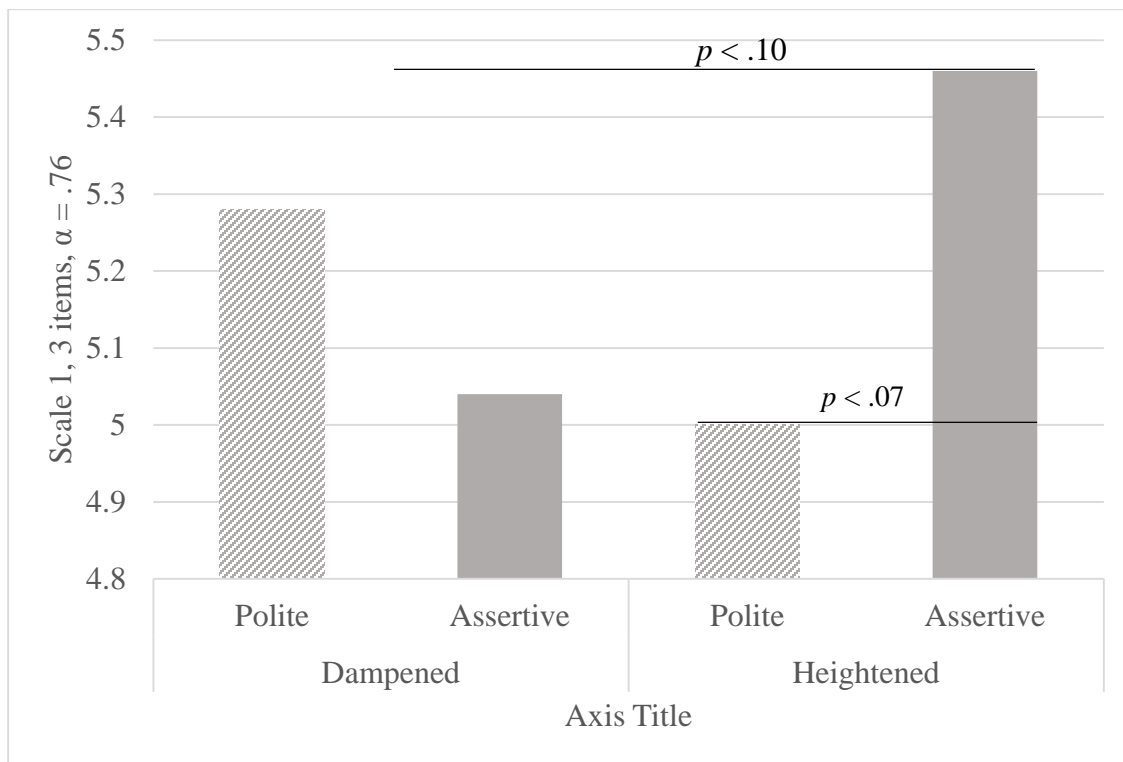
Figure 2: Process Model**Figure 3: Conceptual Model**

Figure 4: Experiment 2 Mind Attribution Ratings

Note: The brand care and concern ratings in experiment 2 follow the same pattern as above.

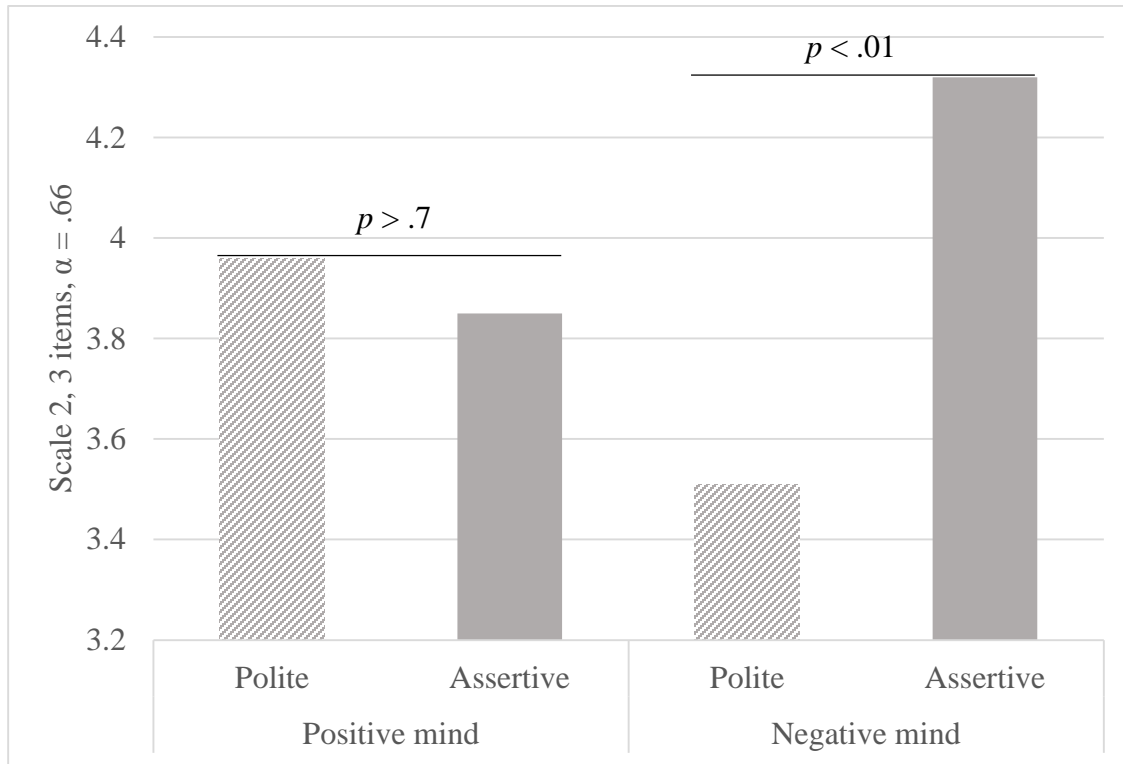
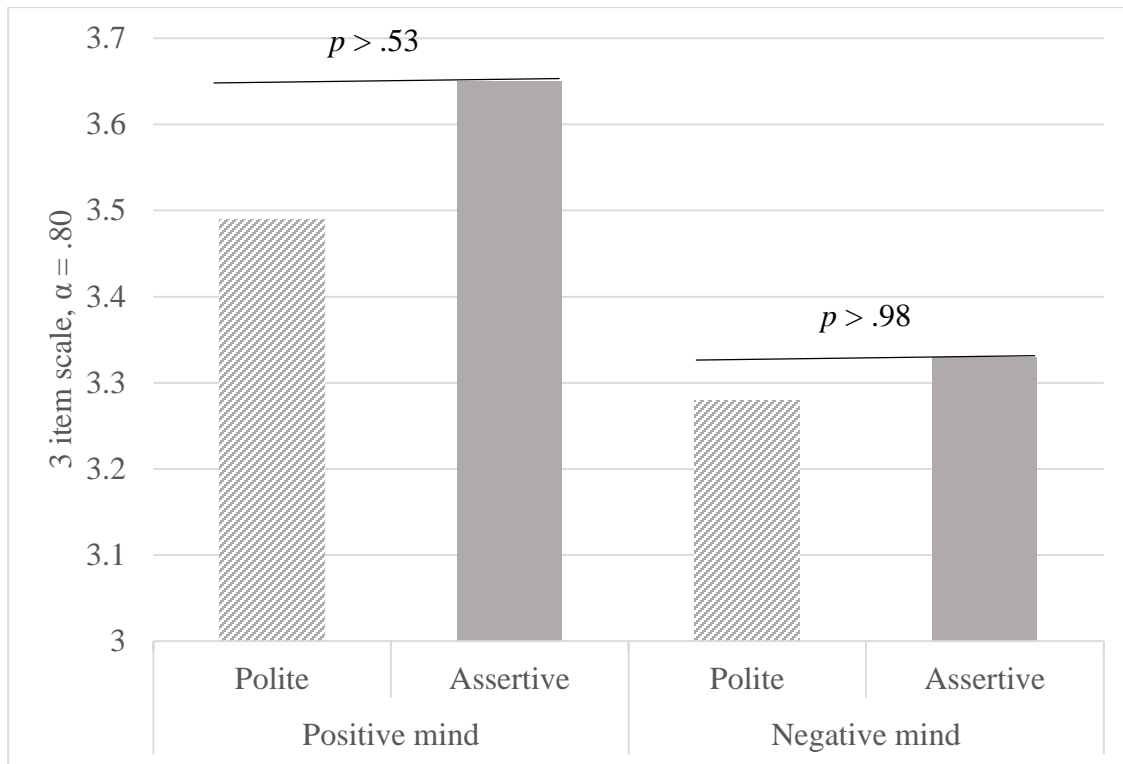
Figure 5a: Experiment 3 Mind Attribution Ratings

Figure 5b: Experiment 3 Brand Care and Concern Ratings

Appendix 1: Pilot Stimuli

Assertive language condition



Barns & Noble is offering special customers unprecedented deals during the month of June! Incredible savings on almost everything in our stores and online.

You are required to forward this email to at least two friends.

Polite language condition

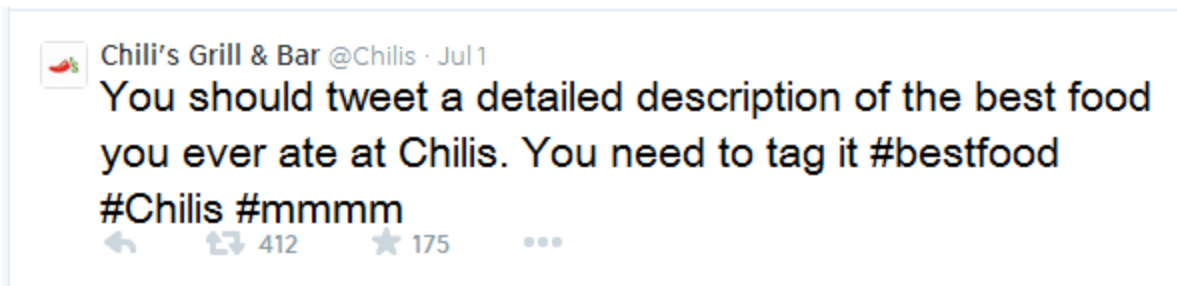


Barns & Noble is offering special customers unprecedented deals during the month of June! Incredible savings on almost everything in our stores and online.

Please help us spread the word about these great deals by forwarding our email to at least two friends.

Appendix 2: Experiment 1a Stimuli

Assertive language condition



Polite language condition



Appendix 3: Mediator Measures

Mind attribution scale 1 (pilot and experiments 1a and 2)

- [Brand] can understand the thoughts and emotions of others (Ward et al. 2013)
- [Brand] understands right versus wrong (ibid.)
- [Brand] can experience pleasure (ibid.)

Mind attribution scale 2 (experiments 1b and 3)

- I can picture the kind of person this brand would be (Kim and McGill 2011)
- [Brand] can understand the thoughts and emotions of others (Ward et al. 2013)
- [Brand] is conscious of itself (ibid.)

[Scale endpoints: 1 = strongly disagree ... 7 = strongly agree, for all items in both scales]

Appendix 4: Dependent Variable Measures

Brand care and concern scale (all experiments except 1b)

- How would you feel overhearing someone praising [brand]*
- How likely would you be to share [brand's] post on your own social media page
- How likely would you be to write a positive review of [brand] in an online review forum

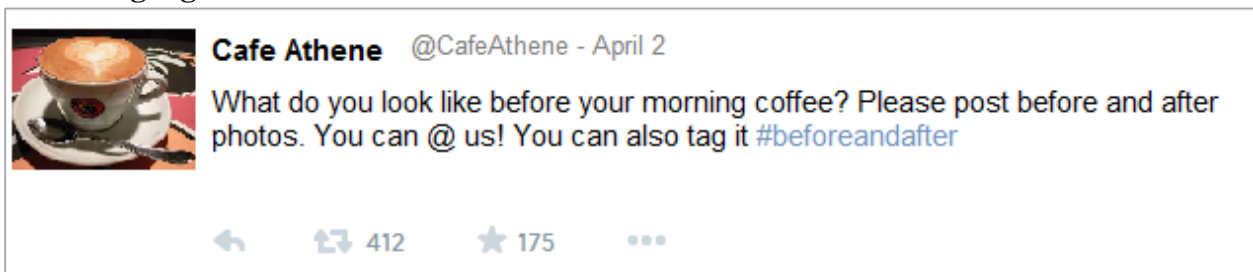
[Scale end points: 1 = very unlikely ... 7 = very likely, except for the item denoted *, which used the end points 1 = very upset ... 7 = very pleased]

Appendix 5: Experiment 1b Stimuli

Assertive language condition



Polite language condition



Appendix 6: Brand Mind Valence Manipulations

Negative Mind: Flourish Payday Loans

Flourish Payday Loans is a firm that offers customers small loans to tide them over until their next payday. The process is simple. Come into a Flourish location, tell us how much you need, and we will give you cash on the spot. The loan is secured with a pre-filled check, which we hold until your next payday (or longer, if necessary). The cost of the loan is fees and interest, which compound until you repay the loan. You can repay as soon as you like, or if you need additional time to repay the loan, you can extend the time period for an additional fee.

Positive Mind: Flourish Social Loans

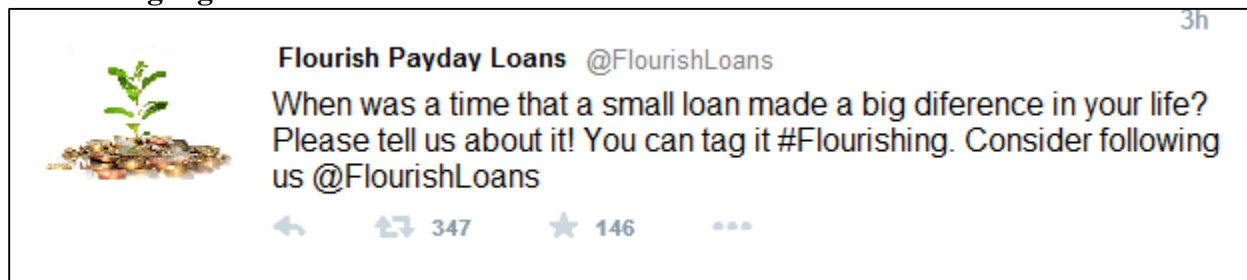
Flourish Social Loans is an organization that offers consumers small loans to tide them over until their next payday. The process is simple. Come into a Flourish location, tell us how much you need, and we will give you cash on the spot. The loan is secured with a promissory note. The cost of the loan is minimal fees and interest, which are used to provide a small profit to the lenders in the organization. You can repay the loan as soon as you like, or if you need additional time to repay the loan, you can extend the time period for a minimal fee.

Appendix 7: Experiment 3 Language Manipulations

Assertive Language



Polite Language



Lura Forcum

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EDUCATION

PhD, Marketing, Kelley School of Business, Indiana University	2015
MA, Social Service Administration, University of Chicago	2004
BA, Political Science, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill	2001

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

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RESEARCH INTERESTS

Consumer behavior	Mind attribution to brands and products
Social cognition	Technology-enabled consumer-firm interactions

PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS AND PAPERS UNDER REVIEW

“Does a Dollar Get You a Dollar’s Worth of Merchandise? The Impact of Power Distance Belief on Price-Quality Judgments.” Invited for third-round review, *Journal of Consumer Research*. With Ashok Lalwani.

“Consumer Memory Dynamics: Effects of Branding and Advertising on Formation, Stability, and Use of Consumer Memory,” Ch. 19 in *Handbook of Applied Memory Research*, Tim Perfect and Steve Lindsay (eds.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. With Shanker Krishnan (2014).

“Using Market Basket Analysis in Management Research,” *Journal of Management*, 39 (7), 1799–1824. With Herman Aguinis and Harry Joo (2013).

WORK IN PROGRESS

“Why Good Consumers Love Bad Brands: Assertive Language Makes Consumers Care for Brands.” Studies complete, preparing for submission to *Journal of Consumer Research* by Sept. 1, 2015. With Shanker Krishnan.

- Best proposal award winner, Mary Kay / Academy of Marketing Science Doctoral Dissertation Competition (2015)
- Best proposal award winner, Society for Marketing Advances Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Competition (2014)
- Honorable mention, Marketing Science Institute Clayton Dissertation Proposal Competition (2014)

“Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: When Does Virtual Trial Lead to Positive Consumer Outcomes?” Studies complete, revising for submission to *Journal of Marketing Research*. With Arun Lakshmanan and Shanker Krishnan.

PRESENTATIONS

Brands and Brand Relationships Workshop, Boston University, (May 2015) “You Can’t Make Me, But You Should Try: Benefits of Controlling Behavior by Brands.”

University of Colorado, Denver, CO (May 2015) “You Can’t Make Me, But You Should Try: Benefits of Controlling Behavior by Brands.”

Mary Kay / Academy of Marketing Science Doctoral Dissertation Competition, Denver, CO (May 2015) “You Can’t Make Me, But You Should Try: Benefits of Controlling Behavior by Brands.”

Mittelstaedt Doctoral Symposium, University of Nebraska-Lincoln (April 2015) “You Can’t Make Me, But You Should Try: Benefits of Controlling Behavior by Brands.”

Guest Lecture for MBA Consumer Insights course, Indiana University (February 2015) “Social Cognition and Brands.”

University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS (October 2014) “You Can’t Make Me, But You Should Try: Benefits of Controlling Behavior by Brands.”

Presenter, 44th Annual Haring Symposium, Bloomington, IN (April 2014) “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: The Dark Side of Product Visualization.”

Association for Consumer Research Annual Conference, Competitive Paper Track, Chicago, IL (October 2013) “The Dark Side of Product Visualization: Negative Effects of Imagery.”

Discussant, 43rd Annual Haring Symposium, Bloomington, IN (March 2013).

SERVICE

Trainee reviewer, *Journal of Consumer Research*

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AWARDS AND HONORS

Mentee, Institute for Brands and Brand Relationships Accelerator Workshop (2015)

John O. Summers Ph.D. Student Support Fund (for conference travel related to the dissertation) (2015)

Best proposal award winner, Mary Kay / Academy of Marketing Science Dissertation Competition (2015)

Academy of Marketing Science Doctoral Consortium Fellow (2015)

Mittelstaedt Doctoral Symposium, Presenter for Indiana University (2015)

Honorable mention, Marketing Science Institute Clayton Dissertation Proposal Competition (2014)

Best proposal award winner, Society for Marketing Advances Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Competition (2014)

Haring Symposium, Presenter for Indiana University (2014)

Haring Symposium, Discussant for Indiana University (2013)

Dean’s Fellowship, Kelley School of Business, Indiana University (2010)

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Marketing Strategy (M450): senior capstone class with computer simulation

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Spring 2015 5.88

DISSERTATION

“Why Good Consumers Love Bad Brands: Assertive Language Makes Consumers Care for Brands.” *Target Journal of Consumer Research*. With Shanker Krishnan.

Committee: Shanker Krishnan (chair), Ashok Lalwani, Adam Duhachek, and Eliot Smith.

The compliance literature demonstrates that commands delivered with certain types of language are more or less likely to result in a consumer carrying out the request. Assertive language reduces consumer compliance, while more polite language is associated with greater compliance. However, this work shows positive effects of assertive language. Such language seems intentional and intentionality is a hallmark of a human-like mind. Thus when brands use assertive language they seem more intentional, and consumers are more likely to attribute a mind to the brand.

Mind attribution is a type of anthropomorphism, in that it suggests the brand has a human-like mind. Marketing research on anthropomorphism has often focused on humanlike appearance through package design or advertising, but mind attribution is another way in which the brand can seem humanlike. This is because a firm that seems intentional may be more likely to be attributed a mind, leading it to be viewed as more anthropomorphic. This increased humanness leads to downstream effects in which consumers are more likely to feel concern for or a desire to help the brand. For example, people may be more upset at seeing someone steal from the brand or more willing to recommend it to others if it is perceived as more humanlike.

In five experiments, I provide evidence of the relationship between assertive language used by a brand and increased mind attribution to the brand, and increased supportive behaviors and concern for the brand. I show evidence of the mediating role of mind attribution. These experiments have strong convergent validity due to the use of different manipulations of assertive language, different brands, and different measures of brand anthropomorphism and moral care and concern for the brand. A final experiment looks at a boundary condition on the effect: negative brand intentions reverse the effect previously documented, such that a brand with a negative intentions toward the consumer is perceived to have greater mind, but is accorded less care and concern.

This work offers a number of important contributions to both the social cognition and marketing anthropomorphization literatures. First, it considers a novel process of brand and product anthropomorphization—via mind attribution. This is not only of theoretical interest, as linguistic cues are shown to suggest complex human-like traits, but it is also of managerial interest, as such methods may be easier to implement across various types of brand images. Second, better understanding why minds are attributed to non-human entities can aid in our understanding of minds being denied to human entities—which has important implications for dehumanization, stereotyping, discrimination, and objectification of other people.

DOCTORAL COURSEWORK

Statistics for Research I	Herman Aguinis
Statistics for Research II	Frank Acito
Multivariate Data Analysis	William Wyatt
Structural Equation Modeling	Scott MacKenzie
Marketing Models	Hai Che
Research Methods	Phil Podsakoff
Behavior in Markets	Shanker Krishnan
Special Topics in Marketing (Consumer Behavior)	Shanker Krishnan
Special Topics in Marketing (Innovation)	Rebecca Slotegraaf
Special Topics in Marketing (Branding)	Neil Morgan
Managerial Research in Marketing I and II	Neil Morgan
Managerial Research in Marketing II	Rebecca Slotegraaf
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SELECTED PAPER ABSTRACTS

Krishnan, Shanker and Lura Forcum (2014), “Consumer Memory Dynamics: Effects of Branding and Advertising on Formation, Stability, and Use of Consumer Memory,” Ch. 19 in *Handbook of Applied Memory Research*, Tim Perfect and Steve Lindsay (eds.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Memory plays an important role in various aspects of consumer behavior. In accordance with its importance, researchers in this domain have indeed explored various aspects of memory in great detail. For example, memory interference, false memories, misinformation, repetition, as well as the spacing effect have been subject to systematic inquiry. On the other hand, other aspects of memory have received scant attention. For example, studies of memory for sensory attributes and affect, metacognitive influences, linguistic effects and individual differences have unearthed more questions than have been answered. In this chapter, marketing research into memory in its multiple roles—mediator, moderator, independent variable, and process—as well as measures of memory are examined. A wide range of memory research from consumer behavior is reviewed and an outlook for further research in this domain is given.

Aguinis, Herman, Lura Forcum, and Harry Joo (2013), “Using Market Basket Analysis in Management Research,” *Journal of Management*, 39 (7), 1799–1824.

Market basket analysis (MBA), also known as association rule mining or affinity analysis, is a data-mining technique that originated in the field of marketing and more recently has been used effectively in other fields, such as bioinformatics, nuclear science, pharmacoepidemiology, immunology, and geophysics. The goal of MBA is to identify relationships (i.e., association rules) between groups of products, items, or categories. We describe MBA and explain that it allows for inductive theorizing; can address contingency (i.e., moderated) relationships; does not rely on assumptions such as linearity, normality, and residual equal variance, which are often violated when using general linear model-based techniques; allows for the use of data often considered “unusable” and “messy” in management research (e.g., data not collected specifically for research purposes); can help build dynamic theories (i.e., theories that consider the role of time explicitly); is suited to examine relationships across levels of analysis; and is practitioner friendly. We explain how the adoption of MBA is likely to help bridge the much-lamented micro–macro and science–practice divides. We also illustrate that use of MBA can lead to insights in substantive management domains, such as human resource management (e.g., employee benefits), organizational behavior (e.g., dysfunctional employee behavior), entrepreneurship (e.g., entrepreneurs’ identities), and strategic management (e.g., corporate social responsibility). We hope our article will serve as a catalyst for the adoption of MBA as a novel methodological approach in management research.

Lalwani, Ashok and Lura Forcum, “Does a Dollar Get You a Dollar’s Worth of Merchandise? The Impact of Power Distance Belief on Price-Quality Judgments.” Invited for third-round review, *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Seven studies examined the link between power distance belief (PDB)—the acceptance and endorsement of power disparities in society—and the tendency to make price-quality judgments (i.e., to use the price of a product to judge its quality), the underlying processes, and boundary conditions. Results suggested that consumers high (vs. low) in PDB have a greater tendency to use price to judge quality because they have a greater need for structure, which makes them more likely to discriminate between brands and rank them based on a salient attribute such as price. The relationships held regardless of whether the price-quality relation was assessed using a standard self-report scale or via actual product judgments, and whether PDB and need for structure were measured or manipulated. The effect was found to be independent of cultural self-construal and risk aversion, was mediated by a need for structure, and disappeared when participants

encountered organized or disorganized environments (but emerged when they encountered neutral ones), when participants' perceptions of control were threatened or enhanced (but emerged when they were unchanged), or when social density was high or low (but emerged when it was moderate). Theoretical implications are discussed.

Lakshmanan, Arun, Lura Forcum, and Shanker Krishnan, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: The Dark Side of Product Visualization." Revising for submission to the *Journal of Marketing Research*.

Consumers try products to evaluate whether they like it. With the increasing use of online technologies, many retailers facilitate virtual product trial. One particular platform in virtual trial is to enable consumers to create images of themselves wearing or using products. With such a feature, the question is whether seeing oneself in the product usage leads to positive evaluations of the product. Across four experiments, we show that when consumers use their own image (versus a standard image) and have control over the process, consumer evaluations are positive. In contrast, with limited control over the process, evaluations are less positive with their own image. We propose that this pattern emerges because the images elicit scrutiny and heightened awareness of the self, which influences product-related outcomes. Thus, we contribute to the literature by outlining a scrutiny-based contingency model that explains both positive and negative effects of using self-images in virtual trial.